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Bystander Intervention: From small steps to large

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Bystander intervention applies to a much broader range of activities than just intervening to confront hazing. Schein (1999) stated that every interaction we have with another person is an intervention. Most of us regularly intervene in the course of our interactions with other people, if only to advocate for our ideas and stand up for the principles to which we subscribe. The opposite of intervention is silence. When we agree with what another person is saying or doing, we say nothing or we nod in agreement. When we disagree with others, depending on our level of self-confidence, we voice our objection and explain our disagreement. Failing to state the convictions of our beliefs is to lose our own integrity.

As a young man I wanted very much to be accepted by the people around me, so I frequently held my beliefs and perceptions back, denied my personal integrity, and acted in ways that I thought others would approve. Despite my efforts to conform to what I thought were the "right" things to do, I found I was not accepted as part of the group. As if I was on the outside looking in, and no one inside noticed, let alone acknowledged me. As I grew older I learned to be myself in spite of the fact that my beliefs and perceptions were different from many of the people around me. Interestingly, as I was true to myself I found that others were more respectful of me. My most important teachers were my fraternity brothers. As the son of a truck driver I knew the location of every "greasy spoon" truck stop for miles around our home, but I never saw the inside of a fine restaurant. They could have humiliated me for my blue-collar background in so many ways. However, my brothers took me aside on numerous occasions to explain proper behavior, help me rehearse my manners, speak about what the ritual might say if it could talk. Kevin Kolman, my mentor in Sigma Phi Epsilon, used to say, "Brotherhood with respect missing is botherhood." I can not imagine that the "good fraternity" is founded in botherhood. [Note the missing letter in the word.]

I have read Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities seeking to find a fraternity or sorority whose cardinal principles suggest that hazing is supported, much less condoned. I have been unsuccessful in finding such an organization. As Brother Robson, editor of two Baird's Manuals, suggested in his book, Educating for Brotherhood, one key to third-party actions that prevent hazing can be found in living the ritual, not just mouthing words in a mystical fashion. One of my graduate students, Kevin Kolman, speaks publicly about what he did within his fraternity chapter. Kevin determined to end the severe hazing that he encountered as a pledge when he heard one of his older fraternity brothers speak about what the ritual might say if it could talk. Kevin read and re-read his Ritual, then announced that on each Wednesday evening he was going to meet in the charter room of his fraternity house to discuss with whoever was willing to attend, the application of ritual lessons to life in the chapter the prior week. The first week Kevin met with only his roommate. By the end of the year, more than two-thirds of his chapter met in the charter room to talk about how their ritual applied to their daily life. As an outside observer I noticed the difference in the chapter without knowing what Kevin was doing. Members were joining campus organizations, participating in student government, and contributing to the quality of student life in a way I had not seen before. I was impressed.

At the same time, Kevin confronted the men who supported hazing in his chapter and let them know in undeniably clear terms that he would not tolerate their behavior. Kevin was successful for several reasons. First, Kevin's nickname is "Tractor" because he is such a big man. Second, Kevin has a great deal of self-confidence born of life experience in a
rking-class family that taught him through hard lessons how dangerous hazing can be. Third, Kevin developed the zeal to stop hazing because it almost killed his own blood brother within the same fraternity at another campus.

Few of us have had to deal with such personal challenges, yet as third-party observers we can still work to eliminate activities that support hazing. Each fraternity and sorority chapter could benefit from an open meeting among members about the application of ritual values to everyday life. Kevin did so advisedly because he wanted to give some of his other, quieter brothers "voice" within the chapter. Kevin noticed that within his chapter muscular athletes were much more likely to be heard than men of smaller stature. One consequence of the reflective weekly ritual discussions was that smaller men's voices were heard on an equal basis with those who were more athletic and demonstrative. The reflections about the personal meaning of the Ritual in daily life did not require that a man be a hyper-masculine alpha male. As the voices of these more thoughtful men were acknowledged in the ritual discussions, their voices began to be respected in chapter meetings. Kevin ascribes the reduction in hazing within his chapter in part to the fact that the men behind these new voices took on leadership roles.

Third-party interventions, then, can be of many forms. Small, small acts of humiliation or intimidation can be contested, not by making absolute demands or direct confrontations, but by asking questions. "Wow, interesting, what about asking a man to say the Greek alphabet three times before a lit match burns his fingers will make him a stronger brother?" "In what way does cleaning the toilet with a toothbrush result in developing life-long good hygiene?" "What about asking men to live in the same clothes for ten days without showering enhances the campus reputation of the chapter among faculty members who write letters of recommendation?" "In what way does referring to women by their body parts encourage men to become faithful husbands and fathers?"

Second, using "I" statements at opportune times supports the value of asking questions. "Brother, I am uncomfortable with your actions toward our new members. Tell me the ways that asking them to do 50 push-ups every time you see them will increase their respect for you when they are initiated?" "Sisters, I am uncomfortable with encouraging our new members to visit fraternity houses and play drinking games. How does this support our Rituals and Creed?" "Brother, your actions do not support what I believe are the cardinal principles of our fraternity. Tell me what part of Love, Honor, and Truth is found in asking a man to drop his shorts in front of a sorority house? What part of Truth, Temperance and Tolerance is found in asking a man to drink a "muth of Johnnie Walker Red as part of a pledge exam?" "What part of Virtue, Diligence, and Brotherly love is found in urinating on a new member's bed?" "Sisters, I do not find it appropriate to require our new members to sing sexually-explicit songs to fraternities. This makes me and others uncomfortable, and potentially invites unwanted sexual advances to our new members."

What are the new members supposed to learn by being forced to live in the chapter basement the week prior to initiation? Aren't there better ways of creating a sense of brotherhood? Isn't there a better way to encourage the new members to focus on their impending initiation other than telling them they cannot communicate with family or friends while they are pledging? Are there other ways we can teach the new members teamwork without having them separate sprinkles while they sit together in silence? Sure, it won't hurt anyone to make them carry a lighter, change for a dollar and a condom, but why do we have the new members follow pointless orders?

Third, successfully making interventions at lower levels of confrontation will enable one to develop the interpersonal skills and confidence to make interventions at increasingly higher levels of personal risk. The ability to confront individuals can grow across time to the ability to confront an entire group with convincing effectiveness. Earlier this week one of the men in the fraternity I advise remarked about my strong statements against hazing in our chapter and how much that meant to him. He said that without my voice as a chapter advisor against hazing he would not have joined the fraternity. Interestingly, my impression of this young man is a socially-skilled athlete, a leader, and a popular brother. Not until he told me about the rooms in which he lived as a teenager did I come to appreciate the reasons my anti-hazing position was so important to him. He went through a difficult time during those years that resulted in severe depression. Hazing, of almost any kind, would have triggered a soul-breaking relapse.

Learn to confront acts of hazing just as one might confront acts of rudeness, intimidation, racism, sexism, or classism. Many acts of hazing are done without intentional malice, but at the moment without giving thought to a deeper meaning. Simply asking a person who starts to intimidate, humiliate, roast, razz, or ride another person for the reason behind what they are doing will result in less hazing, and more importantly, in a greater level of trust among members. In fraternities and sororities, we call that greater level of trust "brotherhood" and "sisterhood."

Charles G. Eberly, Professor of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University, joined Sigma Phi Epsilon at Bowling Green State University in 1960. He was inducted into the Order of the Golden Heart, the Fraternity's highest honor, in 2003. Eberly's belief is that living the Ritual (a just and upright life) is far more demanding than any form of hazing.